DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 257 126 CS 208 993

AUTHOR Martindale, Carolyn
TITLE Covering Causes of Social Upheaval.
PUB DATE Aug 85
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (68th, Memphis, TN, August 3-6, 1985). For a related document, see CS 208 991.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Black History; Blacks; *Civil Rights; *Content Analysis; History; Journalism; Mass Media Effects; Media Research; *Newspapers; *News Reporting; Public Opinion; Racial Attitudes; Racial Bias; Racial Factors; Social Action; *Social Bias; *Social Change
IDENTIFIERS *Media Role

ABSTRACT

Noting that not much research has addressed critics' observations that the press devotes little attention to the underlying causes of social protest and upheaval, a study was conducted to examine five newspapers' coverage of civil rights protests--and their causes--during the 1960s. Four leading newspapers from different geographical areas--the "New York Times," the Atlanta "Constitution," the Boston "Globe," and the Chicago "Tribune"--were selected as representative of resource-rich and influential newspapers. The Youngstown (Ohio) "Vindicator," was also selected, partly to obtain a contrast to the larger papers and partly to ascertain the nature of causes coverage in a paper that relied on wire services rather than its own reporters. Items concerning black Americans' protests in 66 issues of each newspaper from 1950 to 1980 were studied. The portion of each item focusing on reasons for the protest was measured in column inches. The results indicated that during the 1960s, the period when they ran the largest amount of coverage of black protests, the papers gave explanation of the causes of the protests the smallest amount of space--an average of only 5%. For issues in the 1970s, most newspapers studied gave a much higher percentage of their protest coverage to explanation of the causes. The study supported the criticisms that the press had failed to provide much explanation of the causes of the protests in the 1960s. (HTH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

ED257126

Covering Causes of Social Upheaval

by

Carolyn Martindale
Youngstown State University
Youngstown, Ohio 44555

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Carolyn Martindale

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Paper accepted for presentation
at Mass Communication and Society Division,
AEJMC Convention in Memphis, Tenn., August, 1985

CS208493

Covering Causes of Social Upheaval

During the civil rights movement of the 1960s black leaders observed that the American press exhibited a vast ignorance of the background and causes of the revolution, and failed to explain the movement to readers. Whitney Young stated that the press had failed to show that the black American's grievances were real. To read the newspapers, Young observed, a person might think the black man "was reacting to some mild inconvenience."[1]

Journalists from throughout the country who attended conferences on the mass media and race relations during the mid-'60s began to suspect that the charge was not unfounded. As one participant noted, "The news media often treat America's racial situation as though it were a plane disaster or a shipwreck. There is overemphasis on a one-shot event, while a half-century of rat infestation in tenements or a chronic unemployment rate is ignored."[2]

This same coverage problem was noted by the Kerner Commission, appointed to investigate the causes of the urban riots. In its 1968 report the commission stated that while journalists had done a good job of covering the <u>events</u> of the civil rights movement and the ghetto riots, sometimes risking their lives to do so, they had failed to cover adequately the

conditions underlying the civil rights revolution and the causes of racial conflict. "The news media have failed to analyze and report adequately on racial problems in the United States," the commission said, and "have failed to communicate to both their black and white audiences a sense of the problems America faces and the sources of potential solutions."[3]

Press inattention to the causes of social upheaval is by no means limited to the 1960s, or to interracial confrontations. A recent George Washington University study of press coverage of issues concerning women noted this same press failure to provide readers with information they needed to understand the issues in the ERA controversy, and criticized journalists' tendency to focus on conflict while paying scant attention to causes.[4]

Paul Good, a TV journalist covering Latin America, said that when he got film or tape of gas grenades exploding or police shooting during riots, he received congratulatory cables from news executives in New York. "But if I attempted to explain quietly why the grenades had gone off, or where they might go off the next time because of what reasons, the cables would read 'Let's hold the analysis for the time being,'" he wrote.[5]

Many other critics also have noted the tendency of the media, especially television, to focus on violence, which is highly dramatic and visual, and to provide little attention to the issues underlying social upheaval.[6]

The reasons for this media inattention to causes are several. One is that journalists are oriented toward seeing news as discrete events, rather than as long-standing situations.

Another is that conflict is a primary news value, and produces dramatic, colorful copy that is highly valued by media executives. Edwin Diamond, discussing out-of-town media's coverage of Boston's school desegregation crisis in the mid-1970s, reported that wire service reporters said their headquarters were primarily interested in stories emphasizing conflict, even when the actual violence was minimal. If the lead of a story transmitted from Boston said "classes were generally peaceful," one reporter recalled, "the New York office would ask the bureau to move up the violence from the fifth or sixth paragraph; reporters soon got the message."[7]

Another possible reason for press inattention to the causes of protest is suggested by a hypothesis outlined by Shoemaker. This theory suggests that the mass media act as agents of social control by portraying groups they perceive to be highly deviant unsympathetically and as nonlegitimate.[8] Thus "the groups' opportunities to reach their goals are decreased, and a possible threat to the status quo is removed."[9] Similarly, Miliband observes that views which conflict with the political consensus are presented as eccentric and inconsequential ideas that reasonable people need not take seriously.[10]

Examples of such coverage are noted by Paletz and Dunn in their study of press coverage of a 1967 Winston-Salem riot. The authors suggest that by focusing on attempts to quell the riots and ignoring the viewpoint of those involved in the violence, the press may have acted to maintain sociocultural consensus and to protect power and class in the social structure.[11]

Johnson, Sears and McConahay noted a similar coverage pattern in their study of how Los Angeles newspapers covered the Watts riot. The authors noted that blacks thought the riot would attract sympathetic white attention to their grievances about police brutality, merchant exploitation, deteriorating housing and other problems. But press attention to black grievances did not increase significantly after the riot, the authors say. Instead, the press reflected white public officials' and white public opinion's interpretation of the riot "as a threat to public safety, rather than as a symptom of serious problems demanding attention."[12]

Shapiro and Williams, in a study of newspaper coverage of the 1980 Miami riot, found that the New York Times provided proportionally more explanation of the causes of the riot than did the Miami Herald or other Florida newspapers, contrary to their expectation that the coverage in the newspapers most proximate to the riot would offer readers the greatest proportion of explanation of the issues underlying the conflict.[13]

If the media do indeed act as agents to maintain the status quo, their ignoring of rioters' viewpoints and grievances can serve to encourage readers to perceive rioters simply as dangerous deviants. And although a riot is clearly a more abberant and threatening phenomenon than a voting rights march or an open housing demonstration, the media inattention to causes illustrated in the riot coverage studies mentioned above may be carried over to press coverage of less violent social protests. This same kind of treatment might extend to coverage of more

peaceful groups that are trying to use social protest to effect change.

Yet as Olien, Donohue and Tichenor point out, such protest is a time-honored method of attempting to resolve social problems when the interests of a group conflict with those of the larger society, and "where more conventional forms of negotiation and compromise are not readily available." The authors add that a primary goal of protest movements is attracting the attention of the wider public through the mass media.[14] Protesters use confrontational tactics to dramatize their aims, call attention to their struggles, and even, as Simons points out, to enlist outside support and delegitimize the opposition.[15] But it is possible that even as the protest groups are relying on the media to disseminate their aims to the general public, journalists themselves are unconsciously reporting on the protests in such a way as to indicate that the protesters are irrational, dangerous, or not to be taken seriously.

Although critics' observations suggest that the press devotes little attention to causes in coverage of social protests, the subject has seldom been addressed in research projects except for the few coverage studies mentioned here. Therefore a study of five newspapers' coverage of protests during the 1960s was designed to measure the papers' coverage of causes. Questions to be answered by the project were "How much of the coverage of social protests during the 1960s was devoted to explanation of the causes of the protests? What was the nature of the coverage? How did the coverage of causes of protest in

the 1960s differ from that provided before and after the civil rights movement?"

Method

Four leading newspapers from different geographical areas of the country--the New York Times, the Atlanta Constitution, the Boston Globe, and the Chicago Tribune--were selected for study. These newspapers represent the kind of resource-rich, influential papers at which it was thought the Kerner Commission was directing its criticisms. The Youngstown (Ohio) Vindicator, a medium-sized metropolitan daily with a circulation of 100,500, also was examined. This paper was studied partly to obtain a contrast to the larger papers, and also to ascertain the nature of causes coverage in a paper which had to rely on wire service reports of civil rights protests, instead of sending its own reporters or utilizing correspondents, as the larger newspapers were able to do.

Items concerning black Americans' protests in 66 issues of each newspaper were studied. The issues examined were drawn randomly from a stratified sample of months, weeks of the month and days of the week during selected years of the period studied. Three issues a year were sampled from the four years from 1950 through 1953 to obtain a picture of the papers' coverage of blacks before the civil rights movement gained momentum. Four issues a year from the six years from 1963 through 1968, at the height of the civil rights movement, were examined. Six issues a year for the five even-numbered years from 1972 through 1980,

after the confrontational activities of the civil rights movement had ceased, also were sampled.

The recording unit was any newspaper item--news or feature story, editorial or opinion column, letter to the editor, photo or cartoon--that concerned black-initiated protests or demonstrations. Items about urban riots were not included, as these were disorders of a different nature and cause from the planned protests.

Each sample issue was scannned, all items about black protests were measured and recorded, and the portion of each protest item devoted to explanation of the reasons for the protest also was measured and recorded. Examples of such explanation would be the reporter explaining, in his own words or quotes from the protesters, what the protesters were attempting to accomplish, the conditions the demonstration was aimed at changing, and other such background information. Intercoder reliability was .86.

Each whole protest item and the portion of each item devoted to explaining causes was measured in column inches based a standard 2.25-inch wide column. Items appearing in a different column width were converted to this size to make comparisons possible. Only three protest stories were found in the 60 issues sampled from the 1950s, 71 were found in the 120 1960s issues sampled, and four were found in the 150 issues coded from the 1970s.

In order to obtain a clearer picture of the nature of the coverage, notes about the kind of coverage provided also were recorded.

Findings

The total number of column inches of protest coverage, and the portion of that coverage devoted to explanation of causes, was computed for each paper for each time period. The column inch totals were then divided by the number of issues sampled for that time period to obtain the coverage averages presented in Table 1. The table shows that during the 1960s, the period when they ran the largest amount of coverage of black protest, the papers gave explanation of the causes of the protests the smallest amount of space. An average of 5% of their total protest coverage sampled from this period was devoted to explanation of the causes of the protests.

Nearly all of the black protest stories coded from this period focused almost entirely on facts about the protest event itself. Typical of the papers' inattention to the conditions underlying the protests was coverage of the 1965 Selma-to-Montgomery march led by Martin Luther King to encourage blacks to register to vote in Alabama and to dramatize the difficulties they encountered in doing so. The New York Times devoted most of its front page and all of an inside page to extensive coverage of this event, providing stories on sympathy marches in other cities, President Johnson's federalizing of the Alabama national guard to protect the marchers, the Southerner in command of the guardsmen, and the hotline connecting the law enforcement officers with Washington.

Nowhere in all this coverage did the Times explain that the number of blacks then registered to vote in Alabama was less than

TABLE 1

Mean number of column inches per issue of coverage of causes of black protest activities as percentage of total coverage of black protest activities in five newspapers during three time periods

Newspaper	Coverage	Time Period		
		1950s	1960s	1970s
NYT	Causes coverage	.25 (50%)	2.79 (11%)	.10 (11%)
	Protest coverage	.50	26.33	.87
AC	Causes coverage	.17 (40%)	.38 (4%)	.30 (36%)
	Protest coverage	.42	10.17	.43
BG	Causes coverage		.46 (3%)	.23 (23%)
	Protest coverage		15.63	1.03
CT	Causes coverage	.08 (33%)	.30 (3%)	.40 (51%)
	Protest coverage	.25	9.18	.79
YV	Causes coverage		.32 (6%)	.12 (56%)
	Protest coverage		5.01	.21

10% of those eligible, nor did the coverage describe the violence and economic reprisals that befell blacks who had tried to register. Aside from a brief mention of white attacks on voting rights demonstrators in Selma the week before, and the attendant clubbing to death of a protester, the Times provided no background on the long-standing black disenfranchisement and unsuccessful efforts to correct it that had prompted the march. The reader was given abundant information on every aspect of the march except an explanation of why the marchers felt their pilgrimage was necessary.

Another characteristic of the coverage during this period was the way the papers showed blacks as demonstrating, staging sit-ins, making demands and issuing warnings about long, hot summers. Since so little explanation was given of the reason they felt their actions were necessary, blacks often appeared as unreasonable, aggressive and demanding. For instance, the headline and lead of a 1963 Times story claimed that black militancy was growing in Jackson, Miss. No confirmation of this claim was offered besides the information that three civil rights groups said they planned to send representatives to Jackson. Not until 22 inches down in the story, after the article had been jumped to another page, did the reporter present the reason for this activity--the recent murder of Medgar Evers.

In 1965 a Times story headlined "Boston Negroes Invade 4 Schools" reported that black parents had attempted peacefully to enroll their children in predominantly white schools. No invasion occurred; no explanation for the parents' action was

offered. Another Times story concerned a 1967 open housing demonstration in Louisville, Ky., where the Kentucky Derby was to be held the following week. The reporter, who had presented only half an inch of explanation of the cause of the demonstration, ended his story with the statement that Dr. King and Dick Gregory would arrive in town before the Derby "to help in efforts to ruin the occasion for the thousands of people expected in town." (Emphasis added.)

The Vindicator coverage illustrated the obstacles to adequate causes coverage at smaller newspapers which lack the resources to send reporters to cover out-of-town conflicts and must rely on wire service reports of the events. Because of the way the wire service stories were edited, on many days the whole civil rights struggle in the South was presented to Vindicator readers in a single round-up story which seemed to be comprised of the first two paragraphs of five different stories. A typical example began with Dr. King presenting a list of demands to city officials in Birmingham, in the third paragraph reported James Meredith's applying to Ole Miss's law school, and in the next four paragraphs covered sit-ins and protests in cities in South Carolina, Alabama and Louisiana. In the process, the reasons for the blacks' demands and efforts were pared down to a single sentence or omitted altogether. A typical seven-inch story included half an inch of explanation of causes.

An unexpected result of the study was the finding that in the 1950s and the 1970s issues sampled, most of the newspapers studied devoted a much higher percentage of their protest

coverage to explanation of the causes of the protests than they had in the 1960s coverage studied. The average of the papers' exploration of causes in the protest stories from these periods was 44% of the total protest coverage sampled from the 1950s, and 35% of that sampled from the 1970s.

Discussion

The coverage examined supported the criticisms that the press had failed to provide much explanation of the causes of protest in the 1960s. The study showed that the papers failed to provide more than cursory attention--an average of 5% of their total protest coverage--to the reasons for the social upheavals then occurring. Instead, the protest coverage was focused on facts and events, and conveyed the impression that newspaper executives regarded the civil rights movemnt simply as an unfolding drama to be chronicled, rather than as a manifestation of a severe societal maladjustment that required exploration by the media.

The result of this kind of coverge is two-fold. As various critics have noted, by covering protests simply as events, without explaining the underlying causes, reporters fail to provide readers with the information they need to understand the dissidents' grievances. Thus various segments of society remain sealed off from each other, and opportunities for increased understanding and remedial action are lost. Also, the papers' focus on violence and controversy helped create a picture of black demonstrators as unreasonably demanding and militant. This

type of coverage, Eric Blanchard has observed, frightens and alienates white readers, reinforcing the beliefs of those who believe the protesters are criminals, and "eroding the position of others who aren't sure yet."[16]

The study's findings of media inattention to causes in the protest stories sampled from the 1960s also lends support to the theory that the media tend to act as preservers to the status quo by providing unsympathetic coverage to those whose behavior threatens it. The greater proportion of causes coverage provided in the protest stories sampled from the 1950s and 1970s might also be explained under this theory. Perhaps because black protests and demonstrations were much more rare in these two periods than they were in the 1960s, they were perceived as less threatening, and journalists were willing to devote more explanation to their causes. (It should be noted here that in Shapiro and Williams' study of the 1980 Miami riot, coverage of causes of the riot and remedial action ranged from 13% of the total riot coverage in the local paper to 43% of the New York Times'.[17])

These differences suggest that it is indeed possible for journalists to dig below the surface controversy to uncover the causes of protest, or even simply to seek out dissidents and allow them to explain their grievances in their own words. Such coverage could make a significant contribution toward the health of society by clarifying the issues involved in social upheaval and possibly outlining possible solutions. Applied to racial protests, it could provide white readers, as the Kerner

Commission urged the press should do, with some sense of the difficulties and frustrations of being black in America.[18] The same techniques also could be used for better informing readers of the issues in any public controversy involving dissident or minority groups, in this nation and abroad.

References

1 Paul L. Fisher and Ralph L. Lowenstein, eds., Race and the News Media, Proceedings of a conference sponsored by Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith and Freedom of Information Center, Univ. of Missouri, 14-18 Nov. 1965 (New York: Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, 1967), pp. 147, 153.

2 Race and the News Media, pp. 118-19.

3 Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (New York: New York Times Co., 1968), pp. 363-66.

4 A Newspaper Study: New Directions for News, Women Studies Program and Policy Center of George Washington University (Washington, D.C.: George Washington University, 1983), pp. 2, 4.

5 Paul Good, The Trouble I've Seen: White Journalist/Black Movement (Washington, D.C.: Howard Univ. Press, 1975), p. 41.

6 Herbert J. Gans, Deciding What's News: A Study of CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, Newsweek, and Time (New York: Pantheon Books, 1979); Lester Markel and Audrey March, Global Challenges to the United States: A Study of the Problems, the Perils and the Proposed Solutions Involved in Washington's Search for a New Role in the World (Rutherford: Farleigh Dickenson Univ. Press, 1976); Barry Cole, ed., Television Today: A Close-Up View (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1981); Adnan Almaney, "International and Foreign Affairs on Network Television News," Journal of Broadcasting, 14 (1970).

7 Edwin Diamond, "The Agony of Responsibility," Columbia Journalism Review, 13, No. 5 (Jan./Feb. 1975), pp. 10-11.

8 Pamela J. Shoemaker, "Media Treatment of Deviant Political Groups," Journalism Quarterly, 61, No. 1 (Spring 1984), p. 66; see also Todd Gitlin, The Whole World Is Watching:

Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1980); David L. Paletz and Robert M. Entman, Media, Power, Politics (New York: Free Press, 1981).

[9] Shoemaker, p. 66.

[10] Robert Miliband, The State in Capitalist Society (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1969).

[11] David L. Paletz and Robert Dunn, "Press Coverage of Civil Disorders: A Case Study of Winston-Salem, 1967," Public Opinion Quarterly, 33 (1969-70), pp. 340-45.

[12] Paula B. Johnson, David O. Sears and John B. McConahay, "Black Invisibility, the Press and the LA Riot," American Journal of Sociology, 76 (Jan. 1971), pp. 713, 717.

[13] Mitchell Shapiro and Wenmouth Williams, Jr., "Civil Disturbance in Miami: Proximity and Conflict in Newspaper Coverage," Newspaper Research Journal, 5, No. 3 (Spring 1984), pp. 66-8.

[14] C.N. Olien, G.A. Donohue and P.T. Tichenor, Media and Stages of Social Conflict, Journalism Monographs, No. 90 (November 1984), p. 1.

[15] Herbert W. Simons, "Persuasion in Social Conflicts: A Critique of Prevailing Conceptions and a Framework for Future Research," Speech Monographs, 39, No. 4 (November 1972), p. 243.

[16] Eric D. Blanchard, "The Poor People and the 'White Press,'" Columbia Journalism Review, 7, No. 3 (Fall 1968), p. 62.

[17] Shapiro and Williams, p. 66.

[18] National Advisory Commission, p. 383.